Understanding and valuing diversity: multiculturalism

The United Kingdom has always had a culturally diverse population (Fryer, 1984; Williams et al., 2003). The first blacks in Britain probably arrived 2,000 years ago as soldiers and slaves associated with the Roman army, many centuries before the Angles and Saxons (the ancestors of the English) appeared. As Winder (2004: 10) points out:

Immigration is an old, old story, one that defines the texture of British life every bit as significantly as our grand heritage of stately homes – many of which themselves have immigrant founders.

Yet, judging by media coverage, readers might conclude that immigration is an unwanted recent phenomenon. Immigrants have been blamed for overstretching schools, driving down wages on building sites, as well as threatening a violent crime wave and even a new HIV epidemic (The Independent, 22 August 2006). The facts according to the Census in 2001 reveal that 4.6 million (7.9 per cent) of the 58.7 million population in England and Wales are regarded as ethnic minorities.

Multicultural education is a philosophy that is essentially concerned with promoting social harmony. It sets out to celebrate diversity, equipping pupils with the knowledge, skills and values to participate in a pluralistic society. The Swann Report (1985) reviewed the educational needs and attainment of children from ethnic minority groups. It recommended mother-tongue teaching and multi-faith religious education, while discouraging separate schools for minority groups. During the 1980s and 1990s schools became increasingly aware of the need to celebrate the diverse cultural traditions of its pupils, although many would agree with Dadzie (2000:xv):
Showing children how to put on saris or listening to Bob Marley in assembly has invariably proven easier than tackling problems like racial harassment in the playground or the disproportionately high school exclusion rates for African-Caribbean boys.

More than twenty years ago, warnings were sounded that multicultural education can become tokenistic when confined to cultural festivals and artefacts considered out of context (Crozier, 1989). This view is shared by Thangata (2004) who believes that any meaningful understanding, of say the significance of Rangoli patterns, cannot be achieved in isolation but requires teachers to make connections across the curriculum.

The Parekh Report (2000) raises some thought-provoking questions on the future of multicultural Britain, in the light of rapid social change. It argues that the national story needs re-thinking and revising. It refers to ‘identities in transition’ and points out: ‘there are many overlaps, borrowings and two-way influences – no community is or can be insulated from all others.’ Unfortunately, institutional and personal racism are endemic in modern society (NUT, 2001). So-called ‘cultural racism’ is a concern, as illustrated by the rise of Islamophobia since the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001. The issue of racism took on added significance following the recommendations of the MacPherson Inquiry (1999) into the brutal murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence. The Inquiry recommended that consideration be given to amending the National Curriculum aimed at valuing cultural diversity and preventing racism, in order to better reflect the needs of a diverse society.

Education has a key role to play in challenging racism and promoting social justice and equality. Schools have specific duties for according to the terms of the Race Relations
(Amendment) Act (2000), for instance to record all racist incidents in school and to promote racial equality. It is unlawful to discriminate against any person on the grounds of race and all teachers have a role to play in eradicating racism and valuing diversity. Inclusion and racial equality are embedded within the requirements of the national curriculum (England and Wales). For instance, in England the non-statutory guidelines for Citizenship at key stages 1 and 2 are designed to promote social justice and moral responsibility. Pupils are to be taught: ‘to realise the nature and consequences of racism, teasing, bullying and aggressive behaviours, and how to respond to them and ask for help’ (QCA website, Citizenship key stage 2 Non-statutory content, 1999). The QCA has published examples of good practice in this field (QCA, 1998). In Northern Ireland teachers are expected to take account of the significant features of pupils’ cultures, languages and faiths, when fostering mutual respect. The most effective practice occurs in schools which demonstrate: clear anti-racist policies, good leadership from senior management teams, supportive parents, governors who show vision and determination, motivated pupils, skilled teachers and the use of stimulating and topical resources.

**Task**
- Visit the Multiverse website (http://www.multiverse.ac.uk/) and consider how you might respond to such scenarios as: Is it right to ignore racist insults or How do you challenge Islamophobia?

Supporters of multicultural education hope that by studying a range of cultures within the curriculum teachers will be able to foster tolerance and racial harmony among learners. Unfortunately there has been little firm evidence that this has occurred. One difficulty has
been the tendency to treat cultures as fixed in time and place. Learners can be left with stereotypical views; what has been described as ‘the Three S’s’ – saris, samosas and steel bands (Matheson and Grosvenor, 1999: 121). Moreover, there are philosophical questions over multicultural education in which all cultures are considered of equal worth – the caste society in India and the Taliban in Afghanistan deny such value to their own inhabitants (Winch and Gingell, 1999). Among the most common misconceptions about multicultural education is that children from ethnic minority groups are ‘all the same’. Within any cultural group, there will be significant variations as the Swann Report (1985) highlighted. Moreover, there is danger of too readily linking the term ‘ethnic minority’ to particular skin colours. Many ethnic minority pupils are white, with countries of origin such as Poland, Cyprus, Ireland and Turkey.

**Moment to reflect**

- Why does multicultural education apply to all schools and how can you overcome common misconceptions?

Multicultural education has terminology which experienced teachers, let alone novices, find problematic. Wilson (2000: 131) makes the point that terms such as ‘race’, ‘ethnic’ ‘culture’ are often used indiscriminately, adding to confusion:

Even race alone is obscure: are we to say that white people in England are a single race, or a blend of different races (Celts, Angles, Saxons, Normans etc)…’Culture’ is worse still: I have seen no definition of this term with any serious pretension to clarity.

One of the major disadvantages in over-using the term ‘race’ is that attention can focus on physical appearance rather than aspects of culture and religion. The British Medical Association (2006: 8) advises: ‘only use a person’s race to identify, or describe, them, if
it is directly relevant to the point you are making. Do not assume that a person’s appearance defines their nationality or cultural background.’ The term ‘ethnicity’, however, is seen as a more ‘dynamic and fluid’ concept with its coverage of ancestry, language, religion, culture, beliefs food, clothes and customs (Claire, 2004: 14).

Wilson (2000) argues that multicultural education is politically motivated and that schools, as they are, are not potent enough to address this. He is not the only one unconvinced of the rationale behind multicultural education. Menter (1999) prefers the term ‘intercultural’ rather than ‘multicultural’ to convey the importance of exchange and interaction between cultures.

References


